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World Cleanup Day — Time To Reflect on The Impact of Consumerism.

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5

> As humans, we must ask ourselves: Do we want to be a benign tumor, coexisting with the Earth, or a malignant one, consuming it until nothing remains

There are many positive and fascinating aspects about humanity. However, while we are living in an age of abundance — and I am certainly not a misanthropist, I cannot unsee the analogy of us humans have become part of a giant cancer tumor inhabiting planet earth. This analogy is not new, nor far fetched. Medical oncologists often use the analogy of a car that has lost control of its accelerator and brakes to describe cancer. Similarly in our world we keep on building structures, urban sprawl, highways, extract and burn fossils to spread even further and faster. We are told to purchase chemical cleaning products to keep our own houses clean and sterile (visible to us), while they invisibly harm the ecosystem we live in (nature is not “out there”, we are part of nature). All that, leading into the extinction of other species — up until the point where our entire ecosystem, including our own species might eventually collapse from our inability to contain the collective obsession of modern-day hunting and gathering.

Similarly in the cancer we all know, which following the common notion “wins by taking over over the host’s body” its success usually is rather of temporary nature. Malignant cancer within itself eventually dies, because the greater ecosystem it exploited died — and just like us humans underestimated its own magnitude. Nobody wins here. Innocuous tumors however grow and coexist, without harming the ecosystem’s health. Malignancy (destruction) versus benign growth (coexistence) therefore parallels our choices in environmental behavior — **It is within us to pick a side.**

Day 1 — World Cleanup Day

This year I joined World Cleanup Day with my company’s volunteer day program. We ended up cleaning my hometown of Frankfurt for consecutive 8 hours. No photos, no corporate LinkedIn wankification, just pure state of flow and moments of consternation, reflecting on the sheer scale of our consumerism . Honestly **I think every “white collar” office worker should do this once per year** - instead of ordering plastic-wrapped takeaway food to save some minutes in the squeezed-in lunch break between the meetings.

Touch some grass, collect cigarette butts by the riverside — or stuff people decided to throw out of their car window — as if burning fossils (farting in our common air while sitting in a rolling sofa) wasn’t already enough

convenience consumerism. The waste we generate is as much of the malignant cancer we spread. **The waste we decide to collect gives us a moment of reflection — how much effort goes into production, collection and recycling.** To me it was a day of mixed feelings — collecting litter in the sun, passing people pledging respect for this one day of cleaning up — but what we collected was just the tip of the iceberg of our very own historical waste footprint. Just imagine the height of the litter you generated in your lifetime.

> *The good thing: It is in our hands to change it for good.*

Day 2 — The Growing Clutter Coffins We Live In

It was Saturday and time to take the #WorldCleanupDay home.
Just recently I came across the concept of generational clutter — the accumulation of clutter passed on generation for generation. The 100 cups or towels you inherit from your family that join the selection of cups you already own etc. — the opposite of intentional consumption. This goes hand in hand with the increased level of squarefeet per person in US housholds and around the world. More space to inhabit — more space to pay rent for, more space to walk around, clean and spend lifetime in, more space to clutter up with things which handcuff you to that very place.

Living space is one thing — but what is the powerbank to your smartphone, allowing infinite amount of screentime and consuming TikTok, is the storage facility to your house. Out of mind, out of sight. Making space for more, for newer stuff — one pick-up load at a time.

Again, all of which sounds a lot like a growing cancer tumor mutating generation for generation and therby gradually slowing down our own agency — by occupying not only physical space but also our minds. And the **common cure to that: Even more consumption.**

My theory is that being gridlocked in a spiral of managing possessions only increases our craving for **time off from our own home** — escaping the duty of managing clutter in trade for a full-service accommodation (be it a hotel or leisure cruise — the consumer coffins the the oceans) with 24/7 all-inclusive buffet. The escaping — or more commonly known, "traveling" — or tourism industry is yet another, ever-growing sector of consumerism.

> As a 10-year-old I besought my family to keep my 5 boxes of Playmobil stuff so that one day my kids

could play with it.

How many toys does a child need for peak happiness? 3 or 300?

Looking back at it with a rational brain: For sure, toys meant everything back then — In general, toys we can assemble ourself (like Playmobil, LEGO, Fischer Technik — or later: Sims and Grand Theft Auto) certainly come with a higher level of meaning attached to (IKEA effect). However, thinking about the scenario that in the past 20 years where my toys were stored in boxes, **four generations of children could have already played with my toys** means that just by pure possession-driven egoism, **by keeping my toys, by not making them available to the market I indirectly created 4x the amount of waste** — due to the fact, new toys were produced to meet the demand induced by advertising, peer-pressure etc.

> *"**Sometimes kids don't play with anything because there's just too many options**" said Sarah Davis, a parenting coach and co-author of the book* Modern Manners for Moms and Dads.

Of course — there are many more examples to tap into — like the average car standing still for 23 hours a day — and when moving, at an occupation level of 1.3/5 passengers. Many societal inefficiencies kept up through low interest by the producing industry, comfort-driven consumers, low level of awareness and not connecting the dots.

> Consume first — manage later. It takes almost no time, effort or money to buy something — but nobody at checkout educates you about the real operational cost, lifetime spent decluttering in the end.

I realize this each time I list something on eBay / classified ads. Similarly so, **it took me 3 days to categorize, rebuild and bundle up ~80% of the Playmobil toys.**

> This process I would describe as "Type 2"-fun. Fun that you enjoy mostly when it reaches its peak-end stage. Jigsaw puzzles, cycling — you name it.

Selling Stuff

Looking up information, writing a listing. Bidding, negotiating, closing the deal. Luckily I found a way of automating and improving my eBay ads in a consistent yet informative and even humorous manner using a Custom GPT I built.

In the end you get a fraction of the price — but even that is connected with an incredibly freeing moment. What's better than someone else carrying on the legacy of stuff you used to attach meaning to — and giving you a 5 star review for that transaction?

Classified ads offer a great level of serendipity — To 50 transactions I can say there is at least one friendship that emerged from it — and the more niche

the product I sold was, the more meaningful the friendship turned out to be. One year-long friend I only got to know because I bought a phone from him 12 years ago.

Iterative Waste Disposal #CarryShitOlympics

I wrapped up the day at the local waste dump. After waiting for 30 minutes in a queue of cars (of which 80% loaded same amount or less) I got rid of a good cubic meter of stuff.

My maximum distance on that thing (I love it, rides like a tank and you can carry people) was 70km, when I moved from The Hague to Utrecht. I truly felt that I moved, appreciated my new home even more.

> *Riding ultra-light and lubed road bikes for 200km per day, sure — but what about doing the same distance on a fully loaded 3-wheeler cargo bike without electrical assistance?*

Let's talk about contemporary instead of competetive sports: In today's consumerist world, for the olympic games of 2028 #Olympia2028 or the #TourDeFrance #LaVuelta **I would propose adding #CarryShitOlympics as an official discipline.** I think it is one of the only possible honest ways of making 1) The result of our consumption more visible and 2) get rid of our waste.

> ***A lots of energy goes into the production of goods*** *— so why not approach the end-of-product lifecycle with a bit more respect — by not adding any more energy consumption to its lifecycle — but instead contributing some physical labour.*

Similarly to the Bestattungsfahrrad, a hearse bicycle for funerals which allows the same for human end-of-life operations. Another honest way to end life — because why would one still want to cause pollution when already dead?

Day 3–More Perspectives

I needed a break from arranging Playmobil stuff. **The last day made me feel as if I had become a Playmobil toy figure myself** (an NPC slave made of plastic), by touching and managing Playmobil-sized coins, tableware, flowers all-day.

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I left on a daytrip to my beloved Utrecht in The Netherlands. Some kayaking on a Sunday to calm down, what else.

A message in a bottle? How exciting! Well...

The experiences of my previous day struck me when I intuitively started collecting plastic bottles (— and, a light bulb?) from the canals. 15 Cents of deposit per bottle — and people just throw them in the canal? That's some A-tier trash — free money! I'm never going to understand that. The most bizarre find I had in the canals of Utrecht on an earlier tour was this mackerel wrapped in plastic. Does this already count as provocative art?

It is great to see a growing awareness though, especially through YouTubers like Beau Miles. Along some other Dutch cities, the municipality of The Hague started a cleanup event on the water where you can get both: a paddle board and a social gathering. How much more meaningful yet frugal would you want to spend your afternoons?

Why — And Where My Journey Started

My motivation in questioning consumerism and becoming more serious about minimalism, I can pinpoint back to two pivotal events. Of course, moving in general — and particularly moving by bicycle was a contributing factor. It's simply those iterations of life. Just as in Design practice you would build, measure and learn. Diverge and converge. Research, purchase, reconsider and sell. Life is not linear — at least it would be a rather boring rollercoaster. There has to be loopings, peaks and valleys

Event 1: Merging 2 households into one (Physical Clutter = Brain Clutter)

At some point I moved places and suddenly had to deal with a lot of stuff. This got me into peak panic mode. I noticed how the increased occupied physical space took impact on my mental state.

Event 2: Living abroad with just a backpack, laptop and a bicycle

What is preached by digital nomads of the world are **coliving accommodations**. Serviced, furnished accommodations you would rent on a monthly basis. Kind of like hotels but more social, at the scale of a house — without the fuzz like concierge, food and spa — but instead with a **kitchen, coworking space, bicycle parking, a shed of tools, a laundromat, cleaning service**. Just a **home away from home**. No paternalism, no one knocking at your room at 9am with a broomstick. You get best of both worlds (hotels and hostels): Coliving is privacy and socialising overload on tap. The perfect conditions to focus on creation.

My essence though was: Besides my 8 hours work per day and resumed cooking habit, I had packed days of fun in Valencia — be it pre-work or after-work.

> *Small amount of things to manage resulted in a free mind.*

Coming back to a room full of stuff at home made me wonder what I really missed during that period.

- **My external monitor?** During my time abroad I got used to working even more focussed and immersed with only one 16"-screen. Turns out I'm not a weirdo — also Pieter Levels used to have 3 screens and highlights the increased level of accessibility in working only with one screen. "You are so close to the tools, like working on a car"
- **My wardrobe?** Turned out **it totally works out to survive on two outfits**, 1 t-shirt per day and weekly laundry. The whole house followed a similar approach, which means that I only wore around 10% of my entire wardrobe at home and became even more selective with the stuff I buy. For instance I bought a denim vest with easy-access bags inside which

allows me to fit Kindle and a water bottle wherever I go. Wore it every day ever since.

- **My bookshelf?** I completed more books than ever before, just by having them easily accessible on the Kindle parked in my denim vest

For me, the choice is clear. Let's ungridlock ourself from the physical stuff that wants to be managed and thereby keeps us slow and poor.

> Go slow, go tiny, scale down. Accumulate not more physical possessions and consumerist waste than your mind wants to manage. What you put in your room or garage you put in your mind too.

Designing in a World Wired for Waste

I sometimes wonder what I'd be doing if I didn't know what I now know.

Chances are, I'd be designing physical products — clever things, perhaps even beautiful ones. Kickstarter darlings. Functional gimmicks. Niche objects of desire. But honestly? That thought makes me uneasy.

Because so many of these objects — designed with love and launched with hype — end up in basements, garages, donation piles, or worse: landfills. Not because they were bad ideas. But because they were part of a system that rewards novelty over longevity, scale over stewardship.

The same logic applies to digital products too. Apps that vanish after a funding round. SaaS tools abandoned after acquisition. Cloud services built on a hidden empire of extractive infrastructure, consuming energy, water, human attention — and sometimes even common sense.

AI is no exception. We train models on the wisdom of the world to generate low-effort outputs for inbox-zero dopamine hits — at a cost that's abstract, until it isn't. Servers don't grow on trees. They're built in deserts, powered by megawatts, cooled by evaporating futures.

That’s the paradox I live in as a digital product designer.
Building useful things while avoiding contributing to the pile.
Shipping ideas while resisting the landfill mindset.

Bottom line, the industry wants us to be distracted, non-critical consumers — and it is very hard to break free — but at least some people should start questioning and reclaiming control. A good start at reclaiming control is listening to podcasts, while being exposed to getting rid of stuff.

And maybe one podcast is enough for now ⤵️

https://www.theminimalists.com/podcast/

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